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ABSTRACT

Limitations to the goals educators set for their students originate primarily from two sources: (1) students' individual abilities and attitudes, and (2) cultural influences that contradict or countermand instruction rather than reinforce it. These contradicting cultural influences are particularly evident in reference to the skills and knowledge teachers try to develop in oral and written communication. The fields of marketing and advertising are the sources of most of the negative influences that disrupt students' development of communication skills, with examples of incorrect grammar, syntax, and spelling reaching students through every medium. Speech communication and English teachers must begin to do some serious adapting of instructional approaches, including reforming educational goals, discussing with students the balance needed between accuracy and creativity in syntax, and directly confronting professionals in marketing and advertising regarding the issue of linguistic corruption for the sake of increased profit margins. (HTH)

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COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVERTISING:
THE NON-ALIGNED DISCIPLINES

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ABSTRACT

Along with our colleagues in English Composition, speech educators need to begin to deal more realistically with the communications environment in which our students live and work. The students are assaulted by examples of poor communications practices in most areas of their personal and professional lives. The fields of advertising and marketing are the source of the most flagrant and influential of these poor communication models with examples of incorrect grammar, syntax, and spelling continuously reaching our students through the high impact mass media. As a profession, we need to work with our colleagues in English and advertising to develop better strategies for both improving our society's communication standards and preparing our students to communicate effectively in spite of the negative reinforcement society gives to our instruction.

COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVERTISING: THE NON-ALIGNED DISCIPLINES

As educators, we all have goals for our students. These goals represent the cognitive and affective skills we want our students to develop, the knowledge we want them to acquire, and the behaviors we want them to master. Our specific instructional methods and plans are then developed accordingly. Unlike other goal-setting situations, there are limits to the degree to which educational goals can be accomplished even with an extremely high quality instructional plan. These limitations on learning derive primarily from two sources: 1) students' individual abilities and attitudes and 2) cultural influences which contradict or countermand our instruction rather than reinforce it. The former, of course, would be adapted to by a perceptive, careful instructor. Unfortunately the latter, the cultural influences, is very difficult to overcome because they are so pervasive and insidious in their effects.

These contradicting cultural influences are particularly evident in reference to the skills and knowledge we try to develop in oral and written communication. In this area, our educational goal is basically for the student to develop clarity and accuracy in his oral and written representation of thought. Therefore, a mastery of fundamental principles of grammar, syntax, and spelling is expected. While we carefully present these principles in the classroom, the students' environment outside the classroom includes a veritable bombard-

ment of examples which contradict those principles. This is not evident in many other academic areas. The student of physics, for example, does not encounter situations in life which contradict the principles he has learned about the laws of gravity, relativity, inertia, etc. Rather his environment includes examples which accurately represent those laws; hence his learning is reinforced. The non-academic world does not equally reinforce all principles of communication.

Let us look first of all at the principle of models as influences on learning. The principle is contained in Thorndike's theory of learning, known as the reinforcement theory, which asserts that stimulus-response conditioning is a fundamental activity of learning.¹ The student is developing "bonds" between concept and example and between example and concept. What is particularly significant for the student of communication is that the development of meaningful bonds is influenced by the "frequency, recency, intensity, and vividness of the experience and the mood and capacity of the subject."² Thus, our present generation's intense exposure to television and very vivid print media will serve as significant reinforcement of bonds relevant to written and oral communication. The specific relevance of the reinforcement theory to communication instruction is further confirmed by Gertrude Boyd in Teaching Communication Skills in the Elementary School when she states that "every time a word is seen correctly written and in its proper context it helps to strengthen the habit of recogni-

tion."³ Boyd further explains that there is a definite connection between good spelling and good reading since a student reads most accurately and confidently those words which he can spell.⁴ This bonding process is not limited just to young learners, of course. The reinforcement of learned skills and knowledge occurs throughout our lives. Likewise, any experiences which contradict learned skills and knowledge have the effect of breaking or weakening old bonds and sowing the seed for new bonds. Any college instructor who has read student essays or any secretary who has transcribed notes and papers written by our own academic colleagues can attest to the fact that when we see a word misspelled often enough, we begin to doubt our own knowledge of the correct spelling (i.e. the bond is weakened). The same applies to principles of syntax and grammar.

The fields of marketing and advertising are the sources of most of the negative influences which disrupt our students' development of communications skill. Looking first at principles of syntax and grammar, we find that advertisers present to our students an array of oral colloquialisms as if they were standard written English. For instance, we are told it's "gonna be, gotta be, Pepsi now!" While in a tavern our order would be "Gimme an I.C. Light." Books are touted as being great "Whodunits." Our ability to discriminate among various brands of plastic food wrap is encouraged with the dictum "You ain't got a thing if you ain't got the cling..." Even the federal government joins in adding to our litany of grammatical

irregularities with brochures bearing titles such as "rural fires...prevent 'em or fight 'em?" This particular brochure, by the way, is distributed in the same schools where rules of capitalization and proper contractions are taught. Another contraction appearing often in advertisements and trade names is the infamous "'n'." It is especially revealing to note its use in the names of allegedly educational toys such "Touch 'n' Tell" and "Sit 'n' Play."

A second category of syntactical errors to which our students are exposed frequently is the non-sentence which is printed as if it were a full sentence. Note the following examples:

- "Introducing a new way to take one of the most recommended liquid cold medicines in history."
- "At last, proven relief from rising hospital costs."
- "The taste that outshines menthol--and leaves you with a clean, fresh taste."
- "How to keep the computer revolution from becoming a revolt."
- "When you know what counts."
- "Closing a gap between fitness and fast food."

It is no wonder that college students instructed to state a topic sentence for an English or speech class will often present a set of words that is actually a phrase or clause.

In addition to being assaulted by grammatical and syntactical errors, our students' mastery of written communication is

impeded by an absolutely incredible assortment of misspellings. These errors abound in products and advertisements appropriate to all age groups, interest groups, and professional fields. The young learner may be attracted to toys such as a "Smurf Getar," "Rite Hite" play food, "Happi Returns" doll, "Stuff Yer Face" game, "Attak Trak" trucks, "Lite Brite" activity games, or any of the hundreds of educational toys and games displaying prominently one manufacturer's logo: "Playskool." Children of all ages are likely to choose among foods known by such eye-catching names as "Froot Loops," "Rice Krispies," "Chex," "Kix," "Kit-Kat," "Cheez Whiz," pie with "Reddi Wip," "finger lickin good chicken," or a baked "potata" from Wendy's. These treats can all be washed down with "Kool Aid" or "Quik." Of course, the health-conscious child will then brush with "Gleem." The dog owner among our students may wish to feed his pet some "Biskits." The high school or college student athlete may include in his wardrobe products sporting labels such as "Jox," "Jontz," "Trax," or "Sox." Of course, on formal occasions the female athlete would prefer to wear "L'eggs." They might listen to record albums such as "Telefone" or work on crafts projects with "Phun Phelt." Even our adult students are not free from this barrage of unanticipated spelling errors. Our shelves of household cleaning products bear labels such as "Scotchgard," "Klean 'n' Shine," "Roach Prufe," "Sno Bol," "Bloo," "Mop and Glo," or "Liquid Plumr." "Roach Prufe," by the way, is manufactured by the Copper Brite Company. Or we might have our cleaning done by professionals such as "Steam

Kare." We put "Luvs" on our babies, buy a "Nite Lite" to keep them company, and wipe their little fingers with "Nice Pak" wipes. In our kitchens, we might find "Handi Wrap," or a seasoning sauce advertised to make our stew "stewpendous," or numerous items guaranteed to be "lite" including cheeses, beers, snack foods, and cigarettes. We shop for these products at the "Valu King" or "Shur-Fine" market. Our family handyman gets up from his "La-Z-Boy" chair to do some workshop projects using such items as "Ruff Cote" paint, "Shurline" tools, the "Wet Stone" sharpening machine, or readies his Toro snow blower purchased with a "S'no Risk" guarantee. Our students continue to have their perceptions of correct spelling disrupted by trade names or phrases used in job settings. The retail clerk might work in or drive past the "Maternity Wearhouse" or a stereo shop whose display window proclaims that the consumers' stereo needs are "Right Hear." The office worker uses "Kwik Kopy" in the office machines while the lab technician operates a "Kwik Set" timer. The most distressing example may be in the mortuary profession where an embalming fluid is used named "Lyf-Lyk tint."⁵

An example that serves especially well to illustrate an important principle of the reinforcement theory of learning is the name of a new chain of fast food restaurants specializing in low calorie entrees. The chain is known as "D'Lites" and has been quite successful in its two years of operation with each store averaging one million dollars in annual sales.⁶ Their motto is "More of a good thing. And less." The fact

that a word as contorted as "D'Lites" and its equally contorted motto is associated with such a successful enterprise does not bode well for accurate bonding of sound communication principles in our students. Learning theory tells us that "a model's behavior is more often imitated when the model has been rewarded."⁷ One million dollar annual sales must certainly be perceived as significant reward.

As concerned, perceptive teachers we must first be aware that our students' already meager communication skills will not receive positive reinforcement from the marketing and advertising industries. Secondly, we must begin to do some serious adapting in our instructional approaches while acknowledging the limitations that will always be placed on our potential goal accomplishments. Such adaptations include re-formulation of our goals, direct discussion with our students of the balance needed between accuracy and creativity in syntax, and direct confrontation of professionals in marketing and advertising regarding the issue of linguistic corruption for the sake of increased profit margins. To a certain extent, these professionals are the adversaries of communications professionals in the struggle to nurture a literate society. We must develop new strategies to realistically deal with that struggle rather than continue blithely to ignore the prevalent factors in our students' experiences which may forever outweigh the valid communications principles we strive to instill in them.

NOTES

1. Harold W. Bernard, Psychology of Learning and Teaching. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), p. 129.
2. Ibid.
3. Gertrude Boyd, Teaching Communication Skills in the Elementary School. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970), p. 59.
4. Ibid.
5. Jessica Mitford, The American Way of Death. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 70.
6. "Lite Bite," Time. (October 24, 1983), p. 74.
7. Morris L. Bigge, Learning Theories for Teachers. (New York: Harper and Row, 4th edition, 1982), p. 164.